

The Votaries of Eternal Silence.

ALL ABOUT THE MONASTERY OF LA TRAPPE.

BY HERBERT VIVIAN.

A detailed description of the almost incredible hardships which the Trappist Monks voluntarily undergo with a complete set of photographs showing various phases of the daily life of the votaries of eternal silence.



F all those who have sought to expiate either their own sins or those of humanity at large by a course of penitence and self-abasement, none have come up to the Trappists in the severity of their rule or the rigour of their voluntary privations. They have, indeed, almost passed into a proverb for abnegation of the world, not merely as regards its various pomps and vanities, but with reference to everything which goes to make life happy and even endurable. It is, therefore, with the utmost bewilderment that a visitor to their famous monastery finds the brethren of this austere community as contented and even as cheerful a set of people as are to be numbered amongst the most zealous pleasure seekers.

It is true that they get up at two in the morning; that they limit their meals to a small allowance of fruit and vegetables washed down with spring water; that their days are devoted to hard manual labour, relieved only by frequent intervals of prayer; that they sleep on bedsteads of planks and straw; that they may never speak except in cases of absolute necessity; that their thoughts are constantly centred upon their latter end; and that there is no relief for their hardships even at the point of death, when, as a last and most signal object-lesson of austerity, they are removed from their straw and laid out upon a heap of ashes.

But it must be remembered that all this is undergone voluntarily, and that, just as a generous person finds a pleasure in giving away things which he needs himself, so the

brethren of La Trappe discover happiness and consolation in mortifications which would be unendurable if imposed against their will. Prisoners who have been condemned to absolute silence and seclusion have generally gone mad in a short period of time, but the Trappists find that their vow of silence confers a fresh zest upon their chaunts in church and upon all their devotional exercises, and it is certainly a fact that they enjoy extraordinary health and spirits and usually attain to a good old age. A hard bed may be disagreeable at first if you have been used to feathers and down, but all are agreed that it is exceedingly healthy. The same thing applies to their coarse woollen garments, and perhaps also to



By Photograph: de]

IN THE CHAPEL,

La Grande Trappe.

their vegetarian diet. Indeed, the eloquent fact remains that whenever there has been an epidemic in their neighbourhood it has always spared them, though they have not shrunk from lavishing their ministrations upon the sick.

One reason why they have stood their hardships so well is that no one is ever admitted to their novitiate who has not an evident vocation ; men who come under the influence of a great misfortune or disappointment, and ask to be admitted among the Trappists, are always discouraged, as indeed every other applicant is until sufficient time has elapsed to prove that he is really in earnest. Once finally admitted, the difficulty is not to incite the friars to austerities, but to keep their zeal within proper bounds. For instance, when one of them is ill, the rules insist that he shall eat meat and enjoy whatever comforts are necessary to his recovery.

But it is very difficult to induce a monk to admit that anything is the matter with him, and even then he is most reluctant to submit to any indulgence. He seems to believe that it is essential to the salvation of his soul that he should mortify his body as much as possible, and every indulgence, however necessary, comes to be regarded by him as a lost opportunity. In any case, however, the indulgence is never a very great one according to our notions, as the remarkable by-laws on the subject amply testify. Nothing is refused to a sick man, we are told, except "luxurious victuals, which flatter the senses without repairing the strength." Veal and chicken, it may be noted, are reckoned among the forbidden luxuries. Other meats, however, and even baths are permitted, if prescribed by the doctor.

The various hardships I have enumerated are intended for the mortification of the body ; the obligation of silence is looked upon as a mortification of the mind. But it must be remembered that it is not allowed to be

so complete as to become a torture. Besides using his tongue to sing the office and to confess, he may consult his superiors, address the chapter or council when asked for his advice, read aloud on certain occasions, and speak whenever the exigencies of his work require it. He may even talk to the beasts of burden he is driving. There is, however, a rule, which at first sight sounds rather Irish, that before a Trappist opens his mouth he must ask leave of his superior. He probably does so by means of a gesture, and leave is never refused, though if it were taken advantage of for unnecessary speech it would entail a severe penance. The friars, indeed, soon become very expert in the language of gesture.

A story is told of a man who made a bet that he would compel one of the Trappist monks to break his vow of silence. He rode along the road until he saw a monk at work in the fields. Him he hailed and asked the way. So much being permitted as a work of charity, the monk answered, but when the rider went on to interrogate him on some trivial matter, he took refuge in silence. The man, however, persisted in his inquiries, and finally, losing his temper, struck the monk across the face with his whip. The monk, obeying the Gospel injunction, at once turned the other cheek to the smiter, who felt exceedingly ashamed of himself and, after profuse apologies, went his way, resigned to the loss of his bet.

The Grande Trappe, which is the chief house of the order, is situated in a romantic Norman



By Photographie de

HOW THE MONKS RECEIVE A GUEST.

[la Grande Trappe.



THE WORTHY COOK PROCURES A HARE FOR THE GUEST'S SUPPER. *[Photo.]*

your amazement, they prostrate themselves at full length on their faces at your feet, like Moslems in an attitude of prayer. This is the traditional Trappist welcome, and is to be taken as an act of humility. Presently they rise and, without uttering a word, beckon you to follow them into the vast peaceful church for a few minutes of silent prayer, after which they lead you into a waiting-room and read aloud to you a chapter of the "Imitation of Christ," until the arrival of the Father who is intrusted with the entertainment of guests.

He is kindness and consideration itself, placing all the resources of the monastery at your disposal, ordering an extra dish for your evening meal, and sparing no pains to minister to your welfare. In this photograph the worthy cook may be seen bringing in a hare for your supper, a special favour, as the monks themselves eat no meat. After supper he leads you to your bedroom, where there are no comforts but every necessary: a good, clean bed, some chairs, a table with writing materials and pious books, a

valley in the neighbourhood of L'Aigle and Mortagne; and its desolate appearance is in admirable keeping with the traditions of this Temple of Silence. The soil is so poor there that, until the monks set to work to cultivate it, it was looked upon as a sterile waste. Indeed, when they first began their operations there, they were exposed to endless ridicule for wasting their energies upon a hopeless task. Now, however, there are plenty of trees and gardens about the monastery, which looks like a fine country house, or perhaps, rather, a smiling white village, as you approach it. After a parley with the lay brother at the entrance gate, you are led into the building and two monks come forward to receive you. They wear long white robes, their heads are closely shaven, and their expression is one of mild benevolence.

All of a sudden, to



VIEW OF THE REFECTORY—OBSERVE THAT THERE ARE NO SEATS. *By l'photographie de la Grande Trappe.*



By Photographie de]

ONE OF THE DORMITORIES,

[la Grande Trappe.

of the order. Everything has been done to make them realize the full severity of the life which lies before them, and every possible discouragement has been presented to them, so that, if necessary, they may turn back while yet there is time. As a rule the novitiate lasts a year; but if there is any doubt about the absolute certainty of a man's suitability to become a Trappist, the period is prolonged according to the discretion of the Abbot. The ceremony

praying-stool and crucifix, and the various requisites of the toilet. Next day you may find that you have been fortunate enough to come in for two interesting ceremonies. First, there is that of washing feet. The monks are all ranged on benches along the walls, with wooden crosses on their breasts, and one of them is presently told off to go round with a basin and towel, and wash the feet of the others, as the Pope does those of twelve poor men in Holy Week. A sweet solemn chaunt is in progress throughout the ceremonies, and the monk solemnly kisses each foot as he completes its ablution. A very small stretch of the imagination is needed to imagine yourself back in the Middle Ages.

The other ceremony is that of admitting four novices to full membership

is one of peculiar solemnity, as is fitting in the case of what amounts almost to a living burial.



By Photographie de]

FOUR NOVICES BEING ADMITTED TO FULL MEMBERSHIP.

[la Grande Trappe.



By Photographie de]

NOVICES RECEIVING INSTRUCTION FROM THE PRIOR.

[la Grande Trappe.

The four novices remain flat on their faces in front of the high altar during the greater part of the ceremony, which consists of a number of penitential psalms; of a solemn allocution, adjuring them for the last time to pause and consider well before taking this important step; of a solemn dedication of their services to the Almighty; and, finally, of their reception with the kiss of peace by the rest of the brethren. The novices remain a good deal apart during their period of probation, but they assemble every day in a large bare room to receive instruction from the Prior. They are for the greater part very young men, and wear expressions of great devoutness and religious enthusiasm; but some of them are more advanced

in life, and bear traces on their countenances of having gone through great tribulations.

Perhaps one of the most characteristic ceremonies is that of the *culpa*, when all the brethren assemble in the chapter-room for the denunciation of each other's shortcomings or breaches of the rules. Denunciations are looked upon as friendly acts. When there is any backwardness about

them, the monks often denounce themselves, enumerating misdeeds of the mind, which only a very severe self-examination could ever have brought to light. When all the denunciations have been finished, the Abbot proceeds to mete out punishments. Sometimes a culprit is bidden remain prostrate



By Photographie de]

THE OPEN-AIR CALVARY, OR PLACE OF PRAYER.

[la Grande Trappe.



THE ABBOT OF LA TRAPPE.
By Photographie de la Grande Trappe.

with his mouth against the flags for a number of hours, or he may be told off to kiss the feet of all his fellows. In nearly every case the punishment is one which would be considered a gross indignity if it were not voluntarily accepted in all cheerfulness.

On Sunday you may assist at the Holy Communion, and notice how all the brethren bestow upon each other the kiss of peace before receiving the Sacrament. Another day you are privileged to enjoy a chat with the Abbot, whom you find directing some irrigation works in the domain of the monastery. He will perhaps be standing among the other workers with a spade in his hand, and is only distinguishable from them by the large cross on his breast; he has sabots on his feet, and his coarse robe is drawn up to his knees. He is quite willing to give all manner of information about the history and present occupations of the Trappists. He points out that La Trappe is a great social as well as religious institution. The work of the monks more than suffices for their maintenance, nor do they depend upon charity or have to draw upon the reserves of the endowments. You can see for yourself the multifarious occupations of the monks, who can certainly not be accused of leading useless or indolent lives. In the morning, the outdoor workers assemble with

their various implements at a large cross in the grounds, and offer up prayers for a blessing on their labours. Out of doors you find them digging and draining the land, shoeing horses, haymaking, gardening, tending cattle, and digging graves.

In one room you find them engaged in the various processes of carpentry. In the dairy they are making huge cheeses, destined to form one of the principal items on their bill of fare. Farther on there is a regular factory, where chocolates are manufactured for sale to the public.

Elsewhere they are busy with the rough tailoring necessary for their costumes, and a sturdy friar presents a quaint appearance sitting at a sewing-machine. Attached to the library is a room where a group of friars is engaged in binding books with professional skill. Farther on there is a laundry, where everyone is obliged to wash his own clothes once a week.

Among the important institutions of the monastery we must not omit to mention the medical hall and hospital, which are looked upon as a great boon by the whole country-side. Indeed, not only the peasants around, but the citizens of distant towns often come here for advice instead of consulting the local doctors, and the medical advice given at the monastery has attained to a great reputation both far and near.

At the time of the French Revolution the



THE CARPENTER'S SHOP.
By Photographie de la Grande Trappe.



NOVICES AT WORK IN THE GARDEN
From a Photo

Trappists were singled out for especially virulent persecution, and they very pluckily started off for Switzerland without in any way concealing their intention to emigrate or abandoning their ecclesiastical garb, which was to the mob like a red rag to a bull. On the tedious pilgrimage they observed all their ordinances with unimpaired stringency, keeping their

vow of silence, except in cases of absolute necessity, and reading the various offices of the church in their carts as they went along. As they could no longer till the ground or pursue their ordinary manual labours, they occupied themselves with making lint by the way. They kept to their usual food and made a point of sleeping on straw, though they paid at the inns like ordinary travellers in order not to disappoint their hosts. When anyone struck them or insulted them by the way, they revenged themselves by praying for him. This incident of their flight must have been among the most dramatic of those exciting times, and it would seem as if a special Providence had watched over them to bring them safely through all their dangers to their destination. Later on Buonaparte took a fancy to them on hearing that they maintained themselves, and he encouraged them to return, but afterwards he repented and persecuted them.

The Trappists have a more or less democratic



From a

THE MONKS HAYMAKING.

[Photo.]



By Photographie de

IN THE BLACKSMITH'S SHOP—THE MONKS SHOEING A HORSE.

[la Grande Trappe.]

constitution. They elect their Abbot, but are forbidden to concert among themselves as to their choice. Obedience is only due to him so long as he conforms to the rules. From time to time, a superior religious official comes round and interrogates all the monks secretly, comparing opinions and eliciting complaints or



By Photographie de]

THE MONKS DIGGING GRAVES.

[la Grande Trappe.

criticisms. In an extreme case an Abbot could be deposed by a chapter consisting of the heads of the various Trappist monasteries, but such an event is unknown, and, so far as it is possible to judge, the monks are all perfectly contented. For the Abbot, monastic life is by no means a quiet retreat from the cares of the world, and he has a very busy time of it, superintending everything and ministering to the wants of his subordinates. His door must always be open to them at all hours, in case any of them should want to consult him about spiritual or bodily troubles, and they can always rely upon finding in him a ready and sympathetic listener.

If one of the friars happens to die during your visit, it is an extremely impressive sight

to behold his wake. Stretched out on a rude wooden bier, with his brown cloak as his only winding-sheet, he occupies the main position in the centre of the church. Some half-dozen candles are placed around him in tall wooden candlesticks, and the friars take it in turns to come and pray beside him, never leaving him night or day until the time comes to lay him in the grave, which it has been one of his duties to dig for himself. You reflect over the simple, unpretentious, dreary end of a man who has spent the best years of his life in the extremes of self-sacrifice, going out of his way to deny himself the most innocent pleasures and the most natural comforts; the peaceful, happy expression of his face haunts you long after you have passed away from the church and monastery,

conjuring up doubts in your mind as to the sterling value of those earthly pleasures which you spend so many anxious thoughts and efforts in struggling to obtain.



By Photographie de]

A DEAD FRIAR RESTING IN THE CHURCH.

[la Grande Trappe.